

# NEWS CLIPS

Published May 5, 2017



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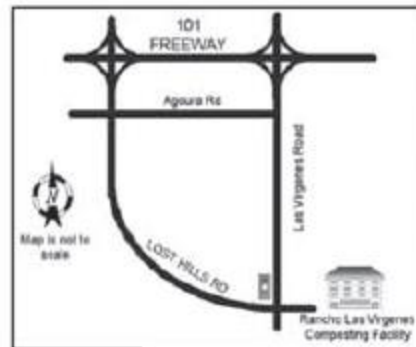
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18AS011

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18A61T

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**Registration required.**  
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18A60T

# Flooding threat looms behind Sierra snowpack

Central Valley braces for the rush of a rapid melt



**AFTER RECORD RAINS** in Northern California, agencies across the state's vast flood-control network are coordinating for a massive influx of snowmelt. Above, a lift in the Fresno Slough Water District. (Photographs by Tomas Ovalle )

By Joseph Serna  
LA Times 5/04/2017

TRANQUILLITY, Calif. — The rain has largely stopped after one of the wettest winters in California.

But as spring temperatures begin to climb and snow in the Sierra Nevada melts, the threat of flooding has communities across the Central Valley on edge.

The storms that set a rainfall record in Northern California have left a vast layer of mountain snowpack, which now sits at almost 200% of average for the first week of May. In some areas, the snow is 80 feet deep, according to state and NASA reports.

Downstream, the rapid snowmelt is keeping public agencies juggling water levels across the state's network of reservoirs. Water district managers conduct daily conference calls to coordinate how much water each expects to release into California's labyrinth of rivers, creeks, bypasses and canals.

The coordination is crucial, as the reservoir releases affect water levels far downstream days later. Also, one reservoir's release may meet with another's, so managers must painstakingly chart how much water rivers and levees can support before overflowing.

The concerns are magnified in some areas by subsidence, a festering problem exacerbated by five years of drought in the Central Valley.

Though the land's gradual sinking has been documented for decades in California, studies show that in Tranquillity and other Central Valley locations, the ground has begun to dip even faster in recent years. During the drought, mandates to protect fish and other wildlife in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta limited irrigation deliveries to farmers in places like Tranquillity, west of Fresno, and Corcoran to the south. Those farmers increasingly relied on groundwater pumping for their crops, which has caused the ground to sink by several feet in some areas.

This subsidence has lowered levee walls in some places and created dips in canal channels that can alter the flow of water.

"The levees, they're just taking a beating," said David Rizzardo, water supply forecasting chief for the state Department of Water Resources. "It's like a boxing match and the guy just doesn't give up and he's taking a left and a right to the face."

A heat wave

could cause chaos

In Mendota, where the Kings and San Joaquin rivers converge and flow north to the delta, subsidence has reduced the capacity of at least one adjacent flood-control channel, officials said.

The question remains how the system will hold up if a scorching heat wave or a warm rain rapidly melts the snow and the reservoirs aren't ready for the surge.

"Just think of a bathtub fairly full, and now you have several bathtubs waiting to fill it and a very small drain on the other end," Rizzardo said. "It's like a maze that you haven't figured out how you're going to get out of yet."

A warm spell this week prompted a new set of warnings for possible flooding. The biggest concerns were along portions of the Truckee and Merced rivers, where Yosemite National Park issued a warning to visitors that the picturesque Pohono Bridge could be flooded Thursday. Other rivers under watch include portions of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers.

Not very tranquil

in Tranquillity

When the levee collapsed in 2006, Tranquillity farmers were desperate to stop the torrent of water that flooded their crops.

As Danny Wade tells it, irrigation officials couldn't fill the breach fast enough, so one farmer decided to plug the hole with his sister's Porsche.

"This was a nice-looking car that just needed some repairs to get it going again," recalled Wade, the Tranquillity Irrigation District's general manager. "His idea was: 'We're going to push the car off in that hole to slow the water down.' He pushed it off there, and it ended up about 300 yards in the field. It looked like a boat going across the field.... Everyone still teases him to this day."

Workers eventually repaired the levee with concrete, but several thousand acres of crops were destroyed.

Now, more than a decade later, this Central Valley community worries there may be a repeat of that 2006 disaster.

In the run-up to the flood, the aging, earthen levee system that protects towns and farms in the Sacramento and San Joaquin river basins was pounded by historic rains, weakened by saturation and compromised by burrowing wildlife — much as it was this winter.

Likewise, the Tranquillity levee failed in May 2006 when a weeklong heat wave melted the Sierra Nevada snowpack and sent runoff surging into the valley.

In places like Tranquillity, a community of 1,000 residents and 10,000 acres of farmland, preparations for the snowmelt have been underway for months.

On a Thursday morning in April, Wade drove his heavy-duty pickup atop the levee that blew out in 2006 and sent water from the James Bypass canal onto fields of cotton and alfalfa seed reaching more than a mile east. He kept his eyes peeled for holes dug by animals.

"Squirrels and gophers are your worst enemy," Wade said. "We were at a 95% chance or better of blowing out."

The animals can create complex burrows, making the levees vulnerable to erosion when they come up against swift-moving water or heavy rain.

Two months ago, Tranquillity's levee patrol found a north-south section that was compromised with seven gopher holes, Wade said.

So his district quickly purchased the 500-acre field next to the levee and excavated the land to reinforce the earthen mound.

"The option is: 'Give up a few acres or all your onions are going to be underwater,' " Wade recalled telling the previous landowner. "It was an easy decision for him."

For weeks, a private contractor and Wade's eight-man crew spent every waking hour packing thick, dark soil onto the top and backside of the levee, with only four- or five-hour breaks for sleep.

'You're not



stopping that flood'

No longer concerned about subsidence, Wade said the fate of Tranquillity now depends on whether the federally run Pine Flat Dam reservoir that feeds the town has enough space for all that snowmelt.

The reservoir can hold 1 million acre-feet of water and was about half-full on May 3. State estimates say there's enough water in the snowpack in the mountains above — somewhere between 2.2 million and 2.5 million acre-feet of water — to fill the reservoir more than twice over.

"If we started getting a warm rain melting the snow too fast and they dump it ... that's the only way we would flood," Wade said. "You could build these banks from here clear to Babel, and you're not stopping that flood."

If the levee in Tranquillity fails, water will have to be diverted to the south fork of the Kings River — and toward Corcoran and its state prison 60 miles south.

Subsidence has been a known issue there too, said Rizzardo, the state water-supply forecasting chief.

"It's not like nobody wants to fix it; it's just a hard fix," he said. "It's a lot of money and a lot of resources to do it."

Preparing for a worst-case scenario

Dustin Fuller, manager of the Cross Creek Flood Control District, can attest to that.

"I can tell you farm ground will go under this year — I don't know to what extent," Fuller said.

"My job is to look at the worst-case scenario, and the worst-case scenario is water encompasses this whole area."

Though he's taken state lawmakers on tours and explained what subsidence is and that new federal standards in the wake of Hurricane Katrina require wider levees, it hasn't resulted in money for levee improvements here, he said.

According to federal standards, rural areas with sparse populations "might not be calculated to generate sufficient economic benefit to offset the costs of levee rehabilitation," a state Legislative Analyst's Office report in March stated. There is an estimated \$2 billion worth of crops in Fresno, Tulare and San Joaquin counties, it said.

Fuller said if Corcoran flooded, it would cause \$600 million in damage.

Taking matters

into his own hands

Many of the state's dams and weirs are at least 60 years old, and in the Central Valley, many were built more than a century ago, the report stated. It noted that flood-management responsibilities in California



are spread among more than 1,300 local agencies managing an infrastructure of more than 20,000 miles of levees and channels and more than 1,500 dams and reservoirs.

In February, Fuller decided he no longer could wait for the politicians. He called a local contractor who has lived in the community for decades to supply the labor, hammered out a contract in a week with the Corcoran prison to excavate one of its wheat fields and launched a \$14-million effort to raise 14 miles of levee wall by 4 feet.

Fuller said his agency will be able to pay off the contract by 2020. In the meantime, crews have piled on more than 700,000 cubic yards of dirt, enough to cover 120 football fields, on top of and alongside the levees.

They are 4 feet taller and 10 feet wider than they were before the drought, he said.

“We had to take the bull by the horns and get to work,” Fuller said. “I don’t have time to wait for the bureaucrats to square this mess out.”



DANNY WADE, chief of the Tranquillity Irrigation District, led a weeks-long effort to shore up levees in and around the Central Valley farm town. ()



TOMAS OVALLE

**EARTH MOVERS** carry dirt to shore up levees at the Kings River and Fresno Slough. If the levees fail, farmland would be inundated.

## OP-ED

California's poor deserve clean water too

The state calls clean water a right. Will Sacramento follow through?

By Jacques Leslie

LA Times 5/04/2017

The lead-poisoned drinking water crisis in Flint, Mich., has gotten all the headlines, but California has a water contamination problem that endangers far more people, and it has existed for decades. State officials have known for a generation that many Californians lack access to clean, safe drinking water, yet, disgracefully, they did not begin to address the issue until five years ago.

The state Legislature is now poised to chalk up a historic achievement as it negotiates Senate Bill 623, which would establish a fund to subsidize adequate water treatment for most of the roughly 1 million Californians who still need it. It's the last step in enabling small, impoverished water systems throughout the state to deliver clean water to their customers.

As co-director of the Visalia-based Community Water Center, Laurel Firestone has helped lead an underdog campaign for clean water over the last decade. "This is the moment," she told me over the phone. "We're finally at a point where we could actually solve this."

The state's bad water is concentrated in the mostly Latino farmworker communities of the San Joaquin Valley, but nearly all of California's 58 counties include small, rural communities with tainted water. Residents there are forced to take their chances or spend an inordinate amount of their usually small incomes on bottled water.

The biggest danger is arsenic, which like uranium, another contaminant, occurs naturally in the soil in some parts of the state. Drink enough arsenic-contaminated water and you may contract cancer or other grave diseases.

Farmers bear responsibility for nitrate, the second-biggest contamination source, which enters the water supply from agricultural runoff and manure. Nitrate can cause "blue baby syndrome," a potentially fatal disorder in infants, and other serious ailments in pregnant women and children.

Racism plays a part in the contamination crisis, but so do poverty, patchwork water systems, and, until recently, an overestimation of the quantity of contaminants required to trigger illness. On top of that, the dominant water narrative in the state pits farmers against fish and environmentalists; clean water advocates have had trouble catching politicians' attention with their equally important story.

Regardless of the reasons for the crisis, the government's longstanding neglect of the problem has been appalling. In some cases, as cities with good water treatment facilities grew, they all but surrounded smaller unincorporated communities that didn't have the funds to fix their contaminated water, yet the larger cities refused to absorb the smaller systems.

In Tulare County, for example, the 1971 general plan went so far as to name 15 unincorporated low-income and minority communities whose drinking water and wastewater infrastructure was deemed unworthy of investment because the communities had “little or no authentic future.” In fact, 13 of the 15 communities still exist, but the exclusionary policy stayed in the county’s general plan until about a decade ago.

As Latino political power and the environmental justice movement have grown, the issue has gained traction. In 2012, Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation making California the first state to recognize that “every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable and accessible water.”

“We really did a big campaign to get that established,” Firestone said. “Since then, we’ve tried to build on that in multifaceted ways.”

One important step was Senate Bill 88, passed in 2015, which empowered the State Water Resources Control Board to require consolidation of bad water systems into adequate ones. In February, the water board began publicly identifying water systems that are out of compliance with state and federal clean water regulations on its Human Right to Water Portal website.

Most tellingly, new water quality regulations issued by regional water boards allowed the state to threaten punitive enforcement actions against farmers whose practices have contributed to nitrate contamination. In response, the farmers are negotiating with legislators over a provision in SB 623 to set a regular fee they will pay into the new water treatment fund.

Impoverished systems can tap an array of federal and state grants for capital improvements to their treatment equipment, but they still lack funding for operations and maintenance. SB 263 will make available the few hundred million dollars a year needed for that purpose. It’s a modest sum for a state with an annual budget of more than \$170 billion, and, as water board Deputy Director Darrin Polhemus explained to me, subsidizing “the high cost of operations and maintenance in these small systems is essential.”

In addition to collecting money from growers to finance the fund, the legislation would charge the state’s water users a small fee on their monthly bills, in the same way that telephone users subsidize phone service for the needy. Because this amounts to a tax, SB 623 needs the support of two-thirds of the state’s legislators — a high but not insurmountable bar.

A recent poll paid for by the California Water Foundation found that 72% of Californians are willing to pay as much as an extra dollar per month on their water bills to fix the contaminated systems. This is a powerful indication that Californians want to make good on the state’s groundbreaking 2012 proclamation: Clean drinking water is a human right, and providing it, is an act of simple human decency.

Jacques Leslie is a contributing writer to Opinion.



State snowpack is twice normal size



FRANK GEHRKE, chief of the state's snow surveys, checks the snowpack at Phillips Station on Monday. (Rich Pedroncelli Associated Press)

associated press  
LA Times 05/03/2017

State water managers say California's springtime snowpack is nearly double its normal levels after five years of historic drought.

They say all the snow is beginning to melt, increasing the risk of flooding for communities downstream.

The California Department of Water Resources on Monday conducted its final snowpack survey of the state's wet season. The snow holds more water compared with the last several years.

The measurement comes well into spring, when the weather warms and snow melts, rushing downhill into canals and reservoirs.

Forecasters with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration expect the Merced River in Yosemite National Park to go about a foot over its banks Wednesday.

The mountain snow provides roughly a third of California's water supply.



# Snowmelt expected to accelerate

Warm temperatures may bring flooding

**SCOTT SMITH AND RICH PEDRONCELLI**

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ventura County Star 5/02/2017

PHILLIPS STATION - Melting of this year's massive Sierra Nevada snowpack will cause California rivers to surge and possibly overflow their banks well into the summer this year, officials said Monday.

Among the first to be affected will be the Merced River running through Yosemite National Park, which is expected to hit flood stage by mid-week with waters rising a foot above its banks, forecasters warned. Large amounts of water are being released from reservoirs downstream from the Sierra Nevada to lower their levels in anticipation of the heavier-than normal melt off of snowpack, which is nearly double its normal size.

Reservoirs on tributaries of the San Joaquin River have been lowered and authorities will continue lowering their levels through June to avoid the possibility of using spillways for emergency water releases, reservoir managers said.

People who flock to the Tuolumne River for recreation should be prepared for rapid and dangerous river water, said Calvin Curtis of the Turlock Irrigation District.

"The water is going to be fast. It's going to be colder than it has been," he said. The snowmelt flows downhill during warm months into reservoirs and canals, which supply one-third of the water used by residents of the most populous U.S. state. It also irrigates crops in the nation's most productive farming state.

The heavy snowpack today blanketing the 400-mile long Sierra Nevada stands in contrast to two years ago when barely any measureable snow remained at this time of year amid California's drought, state water managers said. The California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program on Monday measured that snowpack contains nearly twice the amount of water typically found in the snow at this time of year. While the heavy snow and its high water content will help prevent water shortages that California residents endured over the last several years, the tough winter was cruel to mountain wildlife — killing off bighorn sheep

and lengthening hibernation periods for bears. During California's drought, the iconic Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep moved from lower elevations higher up into the mountains in search of food, said Jason Holley, a wildlife biologist for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

But the heavy snow may have killed 100 of the 600 or so bighorn, he said.

"They've triggered some avalanches," Holley said. "Others go caught in areas with no natural food."



The snowdrifts have also kept many bears hibernating in the remote wilderness inside their dens one month longer than normal because food is still scarce, Holley said.

Hikers heading to the mountains are sure to find damaged roads leading to prized campgrounds that may not be repaired until next year, said Stanislaus National Forest officials.

*Scott Smith reported from Fresno.*

# Wisconsin lakes drying out

**TODD RICHMOND** ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ventura County Star 5/01/2017

TOWN OF OASIS, Wis. - Cris Van Houten thought he was getting a little bit of paradise when he built his house on Huron Lake in Wisconsin's central sands region. He could look out from his deck at the blue water and scuba dive in the shallows.

Less than 10 years later, he and his neighbors are watching their beloved lake dry up. The shoreline has receded at least 20 feet, leaving Van Houten with a new beach he never wanted, his dock high and dry, and scuba diving impossible.

Like other lake property owners, Van Houten blames the high-capacity water wells serving agriculture, particularly potato farmers. As the number of wells grows, Wisconsin finds itself in an unexpected fight. Despite being bordered on three sides by Lake Superior, Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River and cross-hatched with innumerable rivers, streams and lakes, the state no longer can take water for granted.

"We're all pretty sick of what's going on here," said Van Houten, 73. "We're losing our lake to make junk food."

Farmers argue they're just trying to make a living and say there's no evidence the wells are depleting surface waters.

"We need to use the water to produce the food (healthy vegetables) to feed the world," said Tamas Houlihan, executive director of the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association. "There's nothing more important."

So far, Republicans who control state government have sided with agriculture. Republican Attorney General Brad Schimel issued a legal opinion last year saying the Department of Natural Resources lacks the authority to impose conditions on high-capacity wells based on their combined impact on state waters. Now the Legislature is on the verge of exempting well repairs, reconstruction and ownership transfers from the department's oversight.

High-capacity wells, capable of pumping at least 70 gallons of water per minute from the ground, have been part of Wisconsin's landscape since the mid-1940s. They began proliferating sharply in the 1990s as farmers looked to maximize yields and municipalities searched for water sources. In 1990, fewer than 6,000 wells operated in the state; today the state has 12,700.

No part of the state has a higher concentration of high-capacity wells than the central sands, 1.75 million acres in the middle of Wisconsin that has more

than 800 trout streams and 300 lakes, including Huron. The region's sandy soil doesn't hold water well, creating large-scale irrigation demands for potato growers. Of the 3,100 high-capacity wells in the region, 2,290 are used for agricultural irrigation.

Lake property owners have complained since the mid-2000s that the wells are draining central sands lakes and streams.

“I see all this pumping going on with reckless abandon,” Van Houten said.

Paul Zimmerman, governmental affairs director for the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, said rainfall isn’t reliable enough for farmers to produce large yields, especially since the soil is so porous.

“You want to be able to pay your bills,” Zimmerman said. “I don’t think the farming industry should be demonized.”

While farmers say no one has proven the wells are draining surface waters, conservationists point to a study by the Department of Natural Resources, the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the U.S. Geological Survey on well effects on the Little Plover River in the central sands last year.

Republicans are moving a bill through the Legislature that would essentially remove Department of Natural Resources checks on permit adherence when wells are repaired, rebuilt or transferred.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote the bill, said agriculture employs more than 400,000 people, and lawmakers have to support it.



**Cris Van Houten explains how the shoreline of Huron Lake has receded over the years in Oasis, Wis.**

TODD RICHMOND/AP

## Guest Editorial: The Drought's Over, Right?

California's unusually wet winter was welcome news for water agencies and their customers alike. The governor has declared an end to the drought emergency and there are adequate supplies for the foreseeable future. However, history shows us that when previous droughts ended, water use gradually returns to pre-drought levels. This time, we are asking our customers to retain the good practices they've adopted as their water suppliers work to implement projects to mitigate the effects of future shortages.

Over the last five years, most Californians have become more water-efficient. Across the state, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on drought-related messaging, turf removal,

water-wise landscapes, and low water use appliances like washing machines, toilets and dishwashers. If maintained, these changes will have a lasting,

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*While increased water use efficiency is essential, this alone will not ensure water reliability for future generations.*

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beneficial effect.

For most, the best way to control water use is to choose "California Friendly" landscaping. As we enter the spring planting season, now is the time to landscape with attractive drought-tolerant varieties that complement a home's curb appeal. To see real-world examples of beautiful - yet water-stingy - plant types

that will thrive in your area, we encourage area residents to visit local water-wise demonstration gardens. Information on many can be found at [bewaterwise.com](http://bewaterwise.com).

While increased water use efficiency is essential, this alone will not ensure water reliability for future generations. As customers improve efficiency, water suppliers are doing their part to improve supplies.

Regionally, several brackish groundwater desalination facilities and Pure Water projects that process recycled water into drinking water are being built to increase local water sustainability. At the state level, momentum is building for construction of

*(Continued to page 13)*

**Guest Editorial:**

**Is the Drought Over?**

*(Continued from page 4)*

California WaterFix, also known as the Delta tunnels, which will provide more reliable supplies for two-thirds of the state's population while protecting threatened species in the sensitive Sacramento – San Joaquin Delta. Our agencies, along with many others throughout the state, believe it is imperative that this project move forward... now. The tunnels will capture large quantities of stormwater that now flow out to the sea under the Golden Gate Bridge every winter. With less snowpack predicted in the years to come, capturing this stormwater is essential to the social and economic well-being of our state.

The uncertainties of climate change and the looming reality of another drought remind us that water-efficient practices are here to stay. We thank our customers for their water-wise practices in recent years; clearly they made a difference. Remaining efficient – rain or shine, 24/7, 365 – is the smart and sustainable path forward.

*Susan B. Mulligan, P.E.*

*General Manager, Calleguas  
Municipal Water District*

*David W. Pedersen, P.E.*

*General Manager, Las Virgenes  
Municipal Water District*

*Page 4, Valley News Group, April 27, 2017*

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# No DRUGS

## Any questions?

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Dispose of drugs at take-back facilities.*



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